

The Yemeni Contemporary Calls for Reform: A Model in Imam al-Shawkani

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Article Received: 23 Feb 2025, Revised: 25 April 2025, Accepted: 05 May 2025

ABSTRACT: Imam al-Shawkani (1760-1834CE) is one of the most prominent Muslim scholars, reformers, restorers, and supporters of the Islamic awakening and civilizational revival. His thought came into contact with society, knowledge and human nature. He is an inspiration to many pioneers of social, political and economic reform across the Islamic world. The research problem is one of the most serious dilemmas that has plagued the preaching field in the contemporary era, which is for some preachers narrow-minded, short-sightedness in addition to their lack of understanding of the requirements of the era that a reformed preacher should realize. The research aims to identify the reform efforts of al-Shawkani and his constant interaction with the movement of life around him as this contributed to enlightening society and spreading awareness across the Islamic world. The paper uses inductive and descriptive approach, as it relies on collecting related materials then referring to the research literature from sources, references, and previous studies. It collects, classifies, studies, discusses and comments on the materials gathered. The paper finds out that al-Shawkani has a distinguished educational thought as his *ijtihad* led him to a new line, which is the absolute *ijtihad* that is not based on imitation. Among those results are: his warning against the danger of the hateful sectarian fanaticism, which binds minds, robs thinking, and makes man captive to old ideas and preconceived convictions; his contribution to reforming the economic system prevailing in Yemen at the time; and his *Ijtihad* School becoming widely influential inside and outside Yemen until its impact reached India. It was also founded a school of thought bearing his title and name till date.

Keywords: Contemporary calls, Reform, Al-Shawkani, Yemen.

INTRODUCTION

Imam al-Shawkani (1760-1834CE) is one of the most prominent Muslim scholars. Moreover, he is a thinker, an interpreter, a fundamentalist, a linguist, a grammarian, a jurist, and a renovator. He has a distinguished educational thought that relates to society, knowledge, and human nature. He broke off the bonds of imitation in his doctrine at around age thirty, until he became a model of Islamic awakening and one of the great late mujtahids. His *ijtihad* led him to a new line: the absolute *ijtihad*, which is not based on imitation, but on taking the most likely evidence from any doctrine (al-Sharj, 1985, p.22). He was known for his strong character, great position, nobility of morals, sweetness of speech, spontaneous wit, precise observation, wide and deep knowledge, and depth of understanding. He was distinguished from many scholars of his time by his strong adherence to the truth he believed, support for evidence, liberation from the obnoxious imitation, keenness for Islam to remain pure from the mire of heresies, and turbidity of fanaticism (al-Shamiri, 2007, p. 6). His status rose in an era that was famous for its stagnation, backwardness and rupture. At the time, Muslims looked at that stage “with distress and pain, after they became the victims of this life” (Abboud, 1977, p. 193). In the face of this,

al-Shawkani emerged, and his voice rose loudly. He called with pride and loftiness to revive Islam in its first simplicity and to absolute *ijtihad*. He also issued a cry of warning and warned of the danger of the hateful sectarian fanaticism that binds minds, robs thinking, and makes man captive to old ideas and preconceived convictions. He saw that the salvation from this bleak and tragic situation lies in coming back to the Qur'an and Sunnah (al-Sharj, 1985, p. 23). As a result, his light shone until he became a role model for all the men of the modern Islamic awakening. Al-Shawkani *Ijtihad* School became widely influential inside and outside Yemen until its impact reached India, where a school of thought named after him was founded (al-Omari, 1983, p. 14). As for inside Yemen, his *ijtihad* school is still in place till date. It was best represented by the Mufti of Yemen and its Grand Sheikh, Judge Muhammad bin Ismail al-Amrani, may God have mercy on him. He is the scholar, jurist, and reformer to whom the leadership of jurisprudence in Yemen ended, and he, additionally, has superior compositions and successful fatwas. Because of his long life, elevation of his chain of transmission, and multiplying of his students, he became famous in the horizons for his abundance of knowledge, strength of understanding, running mind thinking, and the mastery of comparative jurisprudence. Thus, the scholars of the time subjected to his knowledge, and people followed his compositions. He was trustworthy, knowledgeable, a follower of Sunnah and adherent to it until he reached the rank of diligent imams, a master of piety and humour. His students love him for his humility and abundance of knowledge, to which people of knowledge and virtue admit.

His school still exists and his students are spread in all diverse of life with knowledge, jurisprudence, and humility. His students emulate his way of *ijtihad*, working with evidence, and abandoning hateful sectarian fanaticism, which is considered a scourge of some ignorant people and a sign of sectarian fanaticism, which narrows the legal ruling that the Creator expanded for His creation (al-Khaleej Magazine, 2017). Sectarian fanaticism clashes with the texts of Sharia, which are based on facilitation and removal of embarrassment, it is obnoxious and abhorrent in all its types and forms. One consequence of sectarian fanaticism is that it neither distinguishes the wicked from the good, the wheat from the chaff, nor the right from the wrong.

One of the dilemmas afflicting preaching, intellectual and educational field in the contemporary time is narrow-mindedness and short-sightedness that leads to disastrous consequences that affect everyone in the long run. The one who probes the history of some of the leaders in these fields realizes the enormity of the matter and its direct damage to the structure of Islamic thought, its capacity for renewal, and the paths of its development. This necessitates a search for the greats, one of the prominent of whom is al-Shawkani, of the nation and the pioneers of the Renaissance who contributed to spreading awareness and bridging the gap of differences between Islamic Sects. Imam al-Shawkani is an example of moderation and balance in a time when idols of imitation abounded, and science boards turned into controversy and clamor until its blessing was gone, and its students were few (Sobhi, 1980, 676). The solution lies in realizing that the progressive Islamic thought, which seeks to achieve a virtuous renaissance and implement it in practice in Muslim societies, is based on a clear basis in renewing what has been studied from the effects of prophecy. This renewing is important to achieve the purposes of justice for humanity, a social justice, a political justice, and a renaissance of knowledge and values which re-establishes the Muslim mind away from the

colonial camp. The article employs qualitative, with descriptive analysis, method. It collects data and then analyzes them inductively, focusing on details and comprehensions.

AL-SHAWKANI AND HIS ERA

Imam al-Shawkani lived in a time when conflicts and turmoil abounded. The Islamic state at that time was suffering from severe weakness until its situation reached inter-state conflicts between two states. The first state represents the Shi'ite, the Safavid state, while the second represents the Sunni, the Ottoman Empire.

The Maghreb region also suffered from tribal and ethnic conflicts that turned everything to ashes and even facilitated the invasion of the Spanish and Portuguese campaigns against those countries. Under these conditions of disintegration and weakness, the forces of the Crusader military and economic invasion emerged with the Russian and European sides. Both sides aimed at dividing the Muslim states after the collapse of the Ottoman Islamic Caliphate, when the borders of the states were not fortified, especially the coasts of the sea (Hallaq, 2002, p. 4). This resulted the disintegration of the Muslim states; the Safavid in Persia of majorly Shiite, the Ottoman in Turkey mostly Sunni, and the Mughal in India (al-Sa'idi, n.d., 416). The Safavid suffered weakness and instability when it entered into a bitter conflict with the Ottoman Empire towards 1729CE (al-Sa'idi, n.d., 350). The Ottoman Empire was the object of satisfaction to the Islamic world after it spread Islam, preserved the identity of Muslims, and its conquests reached Europe. It reached its zenith in the sixteenth century CE, but however became weakened in the eighteenth century CE due to external and internal conspiracies (al-Srouji, 1958, p. 72). The Mughal was disintegrated into multiple small states due to the weakness of its kings and the cooperation of the Hindus and the East India Company. It ended with the Indian company taking over and turning it into English colonies in 1856CE (al-Sa'idi, n.d., p. 418).

Yemen witnessed very dangerous political turmoil, and the fanatic voices seeking to divide the nation of Islam rose. The Yemenis paid a heavy price resulting from the facets of idols of imitation (al-Hamli, 2020). And it was in that dire situation that Muhammad bin Ali al-Shawkani emerged. He proclaimed the truth at a time when imitation and hateful sectarian fanaticism prevailed, called for *ijtihad* and adherence to the Book and the Sunnah. He warned against sectarian fanaticism and the danger of forcing people to adhere to one sect, called for the unity of Muslims everywhere. After his call for reform, his innovative views caused an intellectual revolution that frightened sectarian fanatics and made the general Muslims happy in many Islamic countries.

AL-SHAWKANI AND THE QASIMIA STATE IN YEMEN

Imam Al-Shawkani lived in the shadow of the Qasimia State, which belongs to Imam "al-Qasim bin Muhammad (967-1029)" (Salem, 1978, p. 357). He lived contemporarily with three imams of the Qasimia State; Imam al-Mansur Ali, who assumed the Imamate in 1189 and lasted for 35 years (Ministry of Information and Culture, 1980, p. 72), from whom al-Shawkani took over the judiciary at the age of 36 in 1209AH surviving the reigns of al-Mutawakkil ala' Allah Ahmad and al-Mahdi Abdullah (1208-1251 AH) (al-Shawkani, 1979, p. 63); Imam al-Mutawakkil ala' Allah Ahmad, whose rule lasted from 1224 to 1231AH, to whom al-Shawkani was the first to pledge allegiance (al-Shawkani, 1982, p. 23); and Imam al-Mahdi Abdullah bin

al-Mutawakkil Ahmed, who assumed the Imamate from 1231 to 1267AH, the last imam of the time of Imam al-Shawkani (al-Shawkani, 1970, p. 24). Al-Shawkani however called Muslims to embrace Islam as a whole and not to refer to the sayings of scholars or to be intolerant towards them, they should refer directly to the Qur'an and the Sunnah without hindrance (al-Shawkani, 1970, p. 175).

INTELLECTUAL MOVEMENT

Among things taken for granted that the increase in political turmoil negatively affects the scientific movement in the Arab and Islamic world because the permanent scientific movement needs a suitable ground. However, Yemen is almost exempt from this rule. The reason for this is that the intellectual and jurisprudential movement did not stop despite the emerging wars, tribal conflicts, economic crises, and the tyranny of the elements of imitation and fanaticism over the Yemeni scientific environment (al-Sharaji, 1985, p.145). Some researchers attributed the reason for the movement of cultural and intellectual life in Yemen and its non-stop movement to the widespread phenomenon of sectarian fanaticism in the scientific communities, as many distinguished scholars, who had notable scientific standing, set out to confront the current of heresies and corruption. Hence, the scientific antagonism between the two parties contributed to reviving intellectual and cultural life and enriching scientific production significantly and obviously. As a result of the responses, great scholars and writers emerged in an era in which Islamic thought declined, the scientific and intellectual movement stopped, ignorance spread, and myths became popular. Although all that Yemen distinguished at that stage of intellectual production, it participated with the Islamic nation in the discontinuation of the natural, mathematical and mental sciences that were taught in the universities of Cordoba and Baghdad in the era of the prosperity of Islamic civilization (al-Omari, 1988, p. 15).

AL-SHAWKANI'S POLITICAL CONTRIBUTIONS

The author of *Ma'alim tajdeed al-Manhaj al-Fiqhi al-Shawkani Namuthajan* mentions that al-Shawkani's political action came from two main motives: his profession and his intellectual convictions. Through his work as a judge and mufti of the Yemeni lands, he took the pledge of allegiance to the imams of his time from their brothers, uncles, the rest of the Qasim family and all notables when they took over, and it was this that earned him a political influence (al-Khudari, p. 65). Here is al-Shawkani, the renewed and reformed, who shook the dust of fear from himself, announced the raising of the banner of *ijtihad* after a bitter period of time when the mind stopped producing. In the light of this call, enemies of success from all sides wanting to stop his intellectual journey, flocked to him, but he hated and refused to acquiesce or surrender. He edited and wrote books, delivered lessons, practiced fatwas and judiciary, wrote to princes, and corresponded with scholars. His fragrance spread and his light shone, pulling students and adherents to him from all walks of life (al-Awadi, 2016, p. 2).

His works amount to more than a hundred treatises and books (Abdel Jalil, 2020), among which are: *Al-sail al-Jarrar al-Mutadafiq 'ala Hadaiq al-Azhar*, a book whose counterpart is rare in what is known as comparative jurisprudence; *Fath al-Qadir al-Jami' Bayna Fannay al-Riwayah wa-al-Dirayah min al-Tafsir*, contains great pearls indicating that this imam was very knowledgeable about the science of exegesis; *Nail al-Awtar Sharh Muntaqa al-Akhbar* which was widely renowned and became an indispensable reference for

the seeker of knowledge; *Al-Darari al-Modiya fi Sharh al-Durar al-Bahiya*; *Irshaad al-Fuhood ila Tahqeeq al-haqq min 'Ilm al-Usool*, one of the pioneers of what was written in the sciences of Usul al-Fiqh; *Al-Durar al-Bahiya*, a text on jurisprudence; *Al-Badr al-Tali' bi-Mahasin min ba'd al-Qarn al-Sabi'*, a very useful and important reference of men and scholars after the seventh century; and *Wabl al-Ghamam 'ala Shifa' al-Awam*.

AL-SHAWKANI'S POSITION ON MUHAMMAD BIN ABD AL-WAHHAB

Whoever traces the writings between the two imams, Muhammad bin Ali al-Shawkani and Muhammad bin Abd al-Wahhab, will find that they interacted greatly, as each of them called for pure monotheism, fighting heresies, and abandoning blind imitation. As a result of that cooperation, the domes and graves built in Sana'a and in many neighboring places were demolished in addition to the places in the direction of Dhamar and the places related to it (Hassan Khan, 1299 AH, p. 222). They are two stars whose light shone on the Islamic world through their call for reform, renewal, and abandonment of imitation. This does not mean that Imam al-Shawkani is a duplicate of Muhammad bin Abd al-Wahhab or other pioneers of the Islamic renaissance. He tried to correct some of the concepts of the followers of Muhammad bin Abd al-Wahhab, including his call for them to retract their claim that those who do not flatten graves are unbelievers. He, however, considered that a sin, not blasphemy (al-Shajni, p.46). It was also mentioned in the book "*Dhikrayat al-Shawkani*" which is authenticated by Saleh Ramadan Mahmoud, a professor of history at the College of Education in Aden, that:

Although al-Shawkani was impressed by some of the views of Sheikh Muhammad bin Abd al-Wahhab, he was strongly opposed to two things: The Wahhabi sect as a ruler because he does not believe in a doctrine that is imposed by the sword, and any doctrine that is not defended by evidence and argument must die as others died. (Mahmoud, 1983, p.10)

AL-SHAWKANI'S RENEWAL AND REFORM OPINIONS

There is a common belief that the minds of Muslims have become doltish, and their intellectual life has become stagnant and stunted. Therefore, this affected their cultural and intellectual contributions, and they have no choice but to regurgitate the books of their ancestors with annotating, abbreviating, and explaining (Hafez, 2014). However, the evidence confirms, as the researcher believes, that this is a false belief. This belief is only built on delusional theories issued by parties that do not respect the pen of impartial and scientific research because the plain and clear truth contradicts them altogether. The intellectual giving of Muslims has not stopped over the ages. Whoever follows the history of Muslims with fairness will find that it is replete with many bright examples. It is not surprising that the nation of Islam is a nation of production. It is the nation which made civilization and taught the world the meanings of humanity. Rather, it opened up horizons for the world towards urbanization and pushed it to search for the secrets of this vast universe.

In view of the above, the article addresses the most prominent contributions of Muhammad bin Ali al-Shawkani (died in 1250AH/1834CE), who made a revolution that shook the thrones of the oppressors, brought down the illusory idols of imitation, and triumphed for the values of freedom, justice, and equality. They can be summarized in the following elements:

1. Imam al-Shawkani is considered an extension of the renewal school founded by Muhammad bin Ibrahim al-Wazir (775AH - 840AH), the first to work with the science of hadith during that period. Then the renewal culture continued in the path of religious and intellectual reform based on ijtihad, abandoning imitation and sectarian fanaticism (al-Sharji, 1985, p. 270) by the hands of: al-Hassan bin Ahmed al-Jalal, Saleh bin Mahdi al-Muqbili and bin al-Amir al-San'ani. The conclusion of this school was the great renovator Imam Muhammad bin Ali al-Shawkani (al-Ahmadi, 2021).
2. Imam al-Shawkani tried to reform the economic system prevailing in Yemen at the time. He wrote a useful letter titled *al-Dawa'a al-Ajil fi Dafa' al-Adou al-Sa'el*, in which he called for the establishment of justice, and the assignment of government positions to those who are intellectually and scientifically qualified and of good morals (al-Shawkani, 1930, p. 27).
3. He was observant and intelligent of the period in which he lived. Thus he did not antagonize the surrounding environment, which continued to fight him, incite and mobilize the common people against him, as was done to the son of the prince before him (Hallis, 2020).
4. He called for the unity of Muslims, placing them all in the crucible of Islamic brotherhood away from ditching behind sectarian fanaticism and intellectual opinions. He prompted to remove the robes of sectarian and fanaticism (al-Sharji, 1985, p. 276).
5. He is distinguished with two wheels, the wheel of ijtihad promotion, and the wheel to stop imitation. His *Adab al-Tallab* proves him an analyst and a debater of the issues of imitation and ijtihad (al-Sharji, 1985, p. 279).
6. He called for the purification of the Islamic faith from the impurities of polytheism through his two treatises *al-Durr al-Nadeed fi Ikhlas kalimat al-Tawheed* and *Sharh al-Sudur bi-Tahreem raf' al-Qubur*. He warned against building domes, lifting graves, invoking their dead ones, venerating them, and slaughtering and making vows for their sake (al-Shawkani, 1930, p. 32).
7. He called for educational reform and its importance on national reformations. He designates his *Adab al-Talb* to educational reforms leading to nation building, as seen in Fatima Hafez 2014.

Thus, al-Shawkani's activities could be summarized into three basic hypotheses, namely, (i) Prohibition of imitation and the consequent call to ijtihad; (ii) Re-examining the issues of jurisprudence research and put them in their context; and (iii) Re-designing the intellectual contents of the educational system with regard to jurisprudence (Bukrusha, 1999, p. 4).

CONCLUSION

The paper concludes that a fanatic hardly comes out with his thought from the neck of a bottle, especially when it comes to doctrinal, sectarian or racial fanatics. From their point of view, the truth is only what has settled in their consciousness, and their hearts are reassured by it. Therefore, for them, everything else is of no value because it is absurd and intellectual luxury. Al-Shawkani tells what he suffered from at the hands of some of the religious fanatics of his time who belonged to the Zaydi sect (al-Jarudiyah). This sect is attributed to Abu Al-Jarud Ziyad bin al-Mundhir in the first third of the second century Hijri. It is known for its exaggeration in Shiism and its fanaticism against those who oppose it from the followers of the moderate Zaidi current as well as other people of other sects. This is according to what

moderate Zaydi scholars in Yemen tell us during the 17th and 19th centuries such as al-Muqbili, ibn al-Amir al-San'ani, al-Hassan al-Jalal, and as al-Shahristani tells us before them in his book “al-Milal wal-Nihel”. This is also mentioned in “Al-Zaydiyyah” book by Muhammad Abu Zahra, and in other various sources. Afterwards, al-Shawkani (died in 1250AH/1834CE) drafted *Irshad al-Ghabi ila' Madhhab Ahl al-Bayt fi Sahb al-Nabi* in his defense of the companions of Prophet Muhammad (s.‘a.w) (al-Shawkani, 1979, p. 233).

Thus, Imam al-Shawkani is considered a distinguished educational thinker, as his ijtiḥad led him to a new line based on absolute ijtiḥad that is not based on imitation. He considered sectarian fanaticism to be abhorrent as it blinds minds, robs thinking, and makes man captive to old ideas and preconceived convictions. Due to his prestigious position, he took the initiative to reform the economic and educational system, and he was felicitous to do so. His name reached the horizons, and his school of ijtiḥad became widely influential inside and outside Yemen until a school of thought was established in India bearing his title till date. He focused on a central issue represented in spreading the spirit of tolerance and the values and principles of Islam in the Islamic world.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The authors appreciate the support by Center for Research Excellence & Incubation Management (**CREIM**), Universiti Sultan Zainal Abidin (UniSZA) in publishing this paper.